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Beyond institutionalism: toward a transformed global governance theory

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Abstract

Prompted by both promises and pitfalls in Michael's Zürn's *A Theory of Global Governance*, this paper reflects on challenges going forward beyond liberal institutionalism in the study of world politics. Six suggestions are particularly highlighted for future theorizing of global governance: (a) further distance from state-centrism; (b) greater attention to transscalar qualities of global governing; (c) more incorporation of social-structural aspects of global regulation; (d) trilateral integration of individual, institutional, and structural sources of legitimacy in global governance; (e) more synthesis of positive and normative analysis; and (f) transcendence of Euro-centrism. Together these six shifts would generate a transformed global governance theory – and possibly practice as well.

Keywords: Euro-centrism; global governance; institutionalism; legitimacy; social structure; transscalarity

Introduction

Early 2018 saw the publication of a milestone work in institutionalist scholarship on global governance. In *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy & Contestation*, Michael Zürn transcends a long-standing deadlock of realism-vs.-liberalism with what he dubs a 'global politics paradigm'.¹ The volume offers a novel four-step reading of the development of global governance, especially highlighting struggles over legitimacy. Zürn provides a compelling analysis: conceptually sophisticated, methodologically meticulous, empirically rich, and (in its implications for practice) politically important.

A Theory also stimulates wider reflection about contributions and limitations of institutionalist analysis of world order. The term 'institutionalism' is employed here in the vein of international relations (IR) theory, as variously conveyed with other labels such as 'transnationalism', 'regime theory', and 'neoliberalism'. Recent IR institutionalist research has prominently explored issues of accountability,

¹Zürn 2018.

authority, complexity, experimentalism, forum shopping, fragmentation, gridlock, indicators, legitimacy, and orchestration. For IR institutionalists, global governance is about explicit rules and concrete regulatory organizations with a planetary span – and about the ways that agents engage with these apparatuses, both cooperatively and competitively, to pursue their ideas and interests.²

Five decades of IR institutionalist research on global governance have yielded major advances in knowledge of world order, many of them amply manifested in Zürn's *A Theory*. Thanks to this collective work, scholarship today is far more alert to regulation on regional and global scales. In addition, IR institutionalists have explored the workings of power not only through states, but also through non-state entities, networks, norms, and (occasionally) macro social structures such as capitalism and gender hierarchies.³

Yet, while pushing institutionalist knowledge of world order to new frontiers, *A Theory* also reveals important shortfalls of this approach. From my perspective of critical global political sociology, six points especially come to the fore: namely, persistent gravitation toward intergovernmentalism; reification of governance 'levels'; neglect of wider social structures; restricted conception of the sources of legitimacy; subordination of normative considerations; and engrained Euro-centrism. Some of these shortcomings could be considerably addressed with adjustments to IR institutionalist analysis, while other deficits are intrinsic to the paradigm itself. Attending to these issues could move knowledge beyond institutionalism, albeit that the present short commentary can only suggest starting points for a more encompassing and transformed theory of global governance.

Transcending intergovernmentalism

One chronic problem to date with IR institutionalist scholarship is a difficulty fully to shake off state-centrism. Certainly the approach emerged from the 1970s onward substantially in order to address the general neglect of nonstate actors by older legal and realist studies of 'international organization'.⁴ Nevertheless, much institutionalist global governance research of past decades has still started with a concern for intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and then only 'added on' nongovernmental components. Zürn himself acknowledges this contrast between a broader actor perspective in global governance theory and tenacious state-centrism in much institutionalist research practice.⁵ Thus the conceptual discussion in *A Theory* highlights nonstate components of global governance, but the empirical content of the volume still predominantly relates to states and IGOs.

IGO-centric datasets particularly encourage this disconnect between theory and empirics. Most large-*N* evidence for global governance – including the data incorporated in Zürn's book – remains stubbornly intergovernmentalist. Several recent

²'Institutionalism' in IR is thus distinct from 'institutionalism' as generally understood in political economy and sociology. The critiques directed here at 'institutionalism' in IR often do not apply (as much) to 'institutionalism' in other disciplines. Indeed, greater interdisciplinary outreach from IR, as already ongoing in some quarters, could substantially alleviate at least some of the problems identified in the present paper.

³Barnett and Duvall 2004.

⁴Keohane and Nye 1972; Mansbach *et al.* 1976.

⁵Zürn 2018, 264.

innovative initiatives go wider,⁶ but in general quantitative research remains well behind academic theory and concrete practice of governing a global world.

Indeed, after a burst of multilateralist energy in the 1990s, the early 21st century has sooner seen stagnation in formal treaty-based intergovernmentalism.⁷ No major new IGOs have appeared after the International Criminal Court in 1998, and preexisting multilateral bodies have not undergone noteworthy expansion, although Zürn affirms that there has been some continuing rise in IGO authority over states.⁸ Instead, the main growth areas of recent global governance lie in alternative organizational forms such as transgovernmental networks, private regulation, and multistakeholder arrangements. Yet, these architectures figure little in *A Theory*.

To be sure, other important IR research has highlighted this wider variety of institutional designs.⁹ Relevant articles appear regularly in a new generation of journals established since the mid-1990s, such as *European Journal of International Relations*, *Global Governance*, and *Review of International Political Economy*. That said, some of the older and most cited IR journals, as well as the more recently established *Review of International Organizations*, persist with a disproportionate focus on IGOs. Moreover, much research on new forms of global governance has come from outside IR in law, management, public administration, and sociology.¹⁰

Hence, along with several other contributors to this symposium, I would urge further reorientation concerning global governance actors. IR institutionalism needs to consider more institutions. It is not enough to acknowledge that nonstate actors matter and then fall back on state-centrism. Instead of starting with IGOs and then contemplating supplementary attention for other organizational forms, researchers could better first ask ‘who is governing’, without prejudice as to the relevant types of regulatory agencies.¹¹ Begin by looking for the rules and then identify who is making them, rather than the other way around.

Unmaking ‘levels’

A second key wanted adjustment to IR institutionalist scholarship concerns approaches to geography. Already 50 years ago, certain theorists of world politics critiqued the ontological separation of – and instead emphasized interconnections across – national and international spaces.¹² Some subsequent institutionalist research has examined domestic influences on international governance or nationally differentiated application of international norms. Yet, this and other work continues to reify ‘levels’, dividing the global, the regional, the national, and the local. Neglect of transscalar connections that perforate these demarcations misses much of the overall dynamic of contemporary governance.

⁶Kelley and Simmons 2020; Westerwinter 2019.

⁷Keohane 2020; Abbott and Faude 2020.

⁸Zürn 2018, 126–27; also Hooghe *et al.* 2017.

⁹E.g. Hall and Biersteker 2009; Bütthe and Mattli 2011; Hale and Held 2011; Raymond and DeNardis 2015; Scholte 2020b.

¹⁰E.g. Slaughter 2004; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006; Halliday and Shaffer 2015.

¹¹Cf. Barnett *et al.* 2021.

¹²Rosenau 1967.

The very label ‘global governance’ encourages a separate focus on global arenas. Hence, for example, institutionalist studies of ‘global’ economic governance have primarily examined bodies with transplanetary remit (IMF, WTO, and so on), even though agencies with a formally local, national, or regional scope also engage with issues of global production, exchange, and consumption. Similarly, institutionalist investigations of so-called ‘regime complexes’ have normally explored the intersections of multiple global institutions, without considering equally how planet-spanning organizations intersect with regional apparatuses, national governments, and local authorities. *A Theory*, too, concentrates mainly on global-level agencies and gives but passing attention to their entanglements with regulatory arrangements on other scales. To this extent Zürn’s ‘global governance system’ is conceptualized to operate on its own discrete plane.

Certainly, it has been important in recent decades to insist, *inter alia* with institutionalist regime theory, on the distinctive impact of global-scale governance bodies. As noted earlier, state-centrism and a concomitant focus on the national level is deeply embedded in modern social science and political consciousness. Putting a specific focus on global regulatory agencies has helped to counter unviable methodological statism/nationalism/territorialism.

However, underlining the relative autonomy of global regulatory organizations also risks reifying ‘the global level’. Thereby the global comes to be constructed as a sphere unto itself, ontologically separate from other arenas of governance. Such isolation of discrete spaces of regulation patently does not exist in practice. For example, global governance conferences today normally include involvement from regional, national, and local agencies as well as constitutionally global institutions. Hence, the global in global governance never stands on its own.

Most scholars would now readily acknowledge this point about overlapping and intersecting scales; yet, in practice IR institutionalists – and indeed most other governance researchers – still tend to separate ‘levels’. Thus, for instance, the United Nations (UN) is presented as a ‘global’ actor, when its actions actually have a global-regional-national-local character. Similarly, the European Union is defined as a ‘regional’ actor, when its concrete activities range across spatial scales. The Chinese state is treated as a ‘national’ actor, when its field of play, too, is local-to-global. The same goes for substate authorities. Official constitutional jurisdictions and concrete political practices have different geographies.

To counter the reification of spaces, one can shift thinking from ‘globality’ to ‘transscalarity’. The latter vocabulary conveys that, in governance, connections across scales are as important as operations at any level. Hence, instead of focusing on separate strata, contemporary governance research needs to range across and combine geographical spheres. A broadly similar point is often conveyed with notions such as ‘multi-level governance’, ‘network governance’, ‘new medievalism’, ‘polycentricity’, and ‘new constitutionalism’. Likewise, in principle the institutionalist concept of regime complex could be adapted to encompass interrelated scales, rather than to consider only the global level.

An ontological switch from separated levels to integrated scales promotes a welcome redirection of focus from institutions to issues. In other words, the main research concern becomes not how a particular governing body operates, but how a given substantive matter is handled. After all, to examine institutions is

only a means; the greater aim is to understand concrete problems. Hence the foremost concern is not the UN but peace, not Gavi the Vaccine Alliance but health, and so on. In this way, a conceptual reorientation from institutional levels to trans-scalar relations also moves focus from actors to systems.

Incorporating (deeper) social structures

While the above two problems with institutionalist global governance research in IR can be substantially handled through adjustments within the paradigm, a third issue (namely, to integrate deeper social structures) requires a more fundamental ontological overhaul. As Zürn's work illustrates, liberal-institutionalist international theory conceives of global governance primarily in terms of directly tangible law and organization. Such an approach posits that world order is made from *explicit* rules and *concrete* administrative arrangements. Institutional IR theory thereby regards an 'institution' to be an immediately perceptible phenomenon, such as a statute or a bureaucratic office.

Yet, governance – as a process of establishing, enacting, evaluating, and changing regulatory arrangements in society – may also be less directly visible and less obviously embodied. Deitelhoff and Daase in this symposium write similarly of 'more hidden' and 'opaque' forms of rule.¹³ Thus global governance can occur both 'at the surface' through actors and 'behind the scenes' through social structures. Yet, IR institutionalism tends to limit itself to the former.

In contrast, 'institutionalism' as pursued in social research outside IR usually has a broader understanding of 'institutions'. For these other theories, institutions can be impalpable (e.g. in race structures) as well as tangible (e.g. in business organizations). They can be semi-consciously reproduced (e.g. in a ritual) as well as deliberately enacted (e.g. in a policy decision). They can be diffusely manifested (e.g. through a discourse) as well as specifically embodied (e.g. in a treaty).

To be sure, 'institutions' – in a broader sociological understanding as regularized patterns of interactive behavior – have figured in other IR theories beyond liberal institutionalism. For example, constructivists have considered the governing power of certain 'embedded' norms, such as 'free trade', 'human rights', and 'sustainable development'. In addition, the recent so-called 'practice turn' in constructivist international theory has highlighted the regulating effects of everyday routines.¹⁴ Meanwhile, a range of other theories (e.g. Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, and posthumanism) examine global governing through macro social structures such as anthropocentrism, capitalism, neoliberal governmentality, patriarchy, and western modernity.

However, IR institutionalist analysis of global governance has remained mostly silent on social structures in all of these forms (norms, practices, and macro orders). In *A Theory* and elsewhere, IR institutionalism generally presumes that global regulation is solely actor-driven, as individuals and groups pursue their preferences through explicit rules and tangible organizations. IR institutionalists leave unexplored the notion that actors, perceptions, interests, regulatory measures, and

¹³Deitelhoff and Daase 2020, 123, 126.

¹⁴Cf. Leander 2020; Pouliot 2020.

governing bodies might also contain and transmit deeper social-structural forces. At best, IR institutionalism holds a hesitant dialog with constructivist notions of embedded norms, while critical accounts of macro social structure are generally ignored altogether.

It does seem curious that liberal institutionalists in IR continue to decline invitations for interchange and mutual learning with social-structural analysis. My own experience of several decades of field investigations of global governance suggests that deeper structures have powerful impacts on institutional arrangements, and vice versa. Sitting onsite it just seems impossible to make adequate sense of the activities around me without invoking forces connected with anthropocentrism, capitalism, hegemonic states, modern rationalism, and intersecting social stratifications. Research and policy surely, and sorely, need global governance theory that integrates all three types of forces: actor attributes, embedded norms/practices, and macro structures.

Broadening dynamics of legitimacy

This general urging to look beyond institutional dynamics in global governance can also be directed more particularly to research on legitimacy. Investigations of sociological legitimacy – that is, perceptions by subjects that a governor has a right to rule and exercises it appropriately – have attracted significant attention in contemporary global governance studies, including *A Theory*.¹⁵ The prominence of the issue is understandable, given that contestation around the legitimacy of global governance institutions has persisted for several decades. Think only of anti-globalist populism, ‘Occupy!’ protests, and initiatives by so-called ‘emerging powers’ to create alternative regional and global bodies. One may ask how – without greater elite and popular confidence in and support for global governance institutions – adequate policies can be developed to meet today’s pressing planetary challenges. So where do such legitimacy beliefs come from?

IR institutionalist studies root the sources of legitimacy mainly in the purpose, procedure, and performance of the global governance organizations. On such accounts, a global regulatory body obtains trust and approval from its audiences because of institutional features: its mandate, its operations, and/or its results. Many institutionalists have spoken in this regard of ‘input’ and ‘output’ legitimacy. Discussions then center on whether the democratic, technocratic, or fair qualities of a global governance institution’s conduct and/or outcomes matter most in generating legitimacy beliefs among its subjects.¹⁶

There are of course good reasons to suppose that institutional features matter for legitimacy in global governance. Already a century ago, Max Weber focused his path-breaking conceptualization of sociological legitimacy largely on the qualities of governing organizations. Subsequently Beetham, Easton, Habermas, and other theorists have also underlined the importance of institutional grounds of legitimate rule. Empirically, too, we observe that unhappiness with institutional purpose,

¹⁵Tallberg *et al.* 2018.

¹⁶Cf. Barnett 2020.

procedure, and performance have fueled much elite and popular discontent with global governance.

However, it is another thing to suppose, on institutionalist lines, that legitimacy in global governance derives *only* from institutional conditions. Beliefs in the (il) legitimacy of global rules and regulatory arrangements may also have deeper structural sources.¹⁷ For example, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) long suffered major legitimacy difficulties because it was widely viewed as a tool of United States hegemony, even though the institutional workings of the regime were generally regarded as participatory and effective. Conversely, capitalism arguably has supplied substantial structural stocks of elite legitimacy for global financial governance, however poorly its core institutions have often functioned. Likewise, discursive structures (e.g. language and mindsets around ‘development’, ‘human rights’, and ‘security’) can have powerful legitimating consequences for a global governance institution even when its operations accomplish little. In general, a global regulatory organization gains greatest strength when it can draw upon both (and mutually reinforcing) institutional and structural sources of legitimacy. Thus, like global governance studies overall, research on legitimacy beyond the state would benefit from a methodology – hitherto underdeveloped – that interlinks surface actor dynamics and deeper structural forces.

Concurrently with a macro turn toward social structure, institutionalist investigations of legitimacy could fruitfully also take a micro turn to incorporate individual sources of confidence in global governance arrangements. The premise here is that, alongside institutional and structural sources, legitimacy also derives significantly from the personal and psychological circumstances of the perceiving subject. For example, an individual with low social trust may not accord a global governance organization legitimacy, regardless of how democratic, effective, and fair the agency’s institutional qualities might be. Other individual-level conditions that potentially shape legitimacy beliefs include a subject’s political knowledge, self-interest calculations, self-identity constructions, and reception of political communications.¹⁸ Whereas literature from sociology and structural international theory can help institutionalists take a macro turn, research in political psychology and comparative politics can guide a micro turn. A few studies have already sought to synthesize individual and institutional dimensions of legitimacy in global governance,¹⁹ but this track wants more work.

Yet, the fullest and most promising integration would come with a trilateral combination of individual, institutional, and structural sources of legitimacy in global governance.²⁰ Separation of the three aspects in most existing literature is artificial and unsustainable: why would determinants of legitimacy be *either* psychological *or* organizational *or* societal? Far more intuitive is a proposition of combined and mutual causation, where the three forces are each concurrently expressed through, and shaped by, the other two. To be sure, such a holistic approach poses challenges, in particular demanding deeper interdisciplinarity

¹⁷Scholte 2018.

¹⁸Dellmuth 2018.

¹⁹E.g. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015.

²⁰Scholte 2019.

than global governance scholarship has attempted to date. But after decades of institutionalist predominance, might the field now be ripe for a more daring paradigm shift?

Integrating positive and normative analysis

As Michael Zürn would agree, and as several other contributors to this symposium also note, legitimacy is a normative as well as a sociological question.²¹ Researchers have their own perceptions of rightful authority as much as the subjects who are researched. Indeed, academics have provided some of the most thoughtful articulations of values by which the legitimacy (or otherwise) of global governance institutions might be judged. Substantial literatures have developed around standards for global justice in its cultural, ecological, economic, and political dimensions.

Yet, institutionalist global governance theory has generally tapped little into this explicitly normative work. Following a time-honored division of labor in modern academe, explanation has been approached as a value-free exercise for the ‘scientists’, while evaluation has been allocated to data-poor ‘philosophers’. Neither group has ventured far into the domain of the other. In this vein, *A Theory* makes only passing, rather reluctant, and quite generic reference to normative issues. Indeed, Zürn’s discussion of ‘four models of global order with cosmopolitan intent’ mostly addresses institutional design rather than underpinning values.²²

The worry is that such separation of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ can lead institutionalists to become normatively cliché or, worse, to lack moral compass. Thus, many ‘scientists’ offer little more than loose endorsements of ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘peace’, and ‘sustainable development’ in world affairs, with little contemplation of what these principles could entail more precisely. Meanwhile other ‘scientific’ institutionalism loses sight of normative questions altogether, developing highly sophisticated methodologies without a sense of larger purpose.

Indeed, silence on value questions can tend in effect to reinforce the global status quo, including its potentially objectionable qualities. Indeed, one wonders whether the outwardly amoral character of most institutionalist research has reflected a certain complacency about liberal world order. Much of this work, including *A Theory*, seems to assume an inherent goodness of universal human rights, worldwide representative government, open international economy, and peaceful settlement of disputes through international law and multilateral cooperation. Such institutionalism does not consider the possibility that liberalist global governance could (in some respects and however inadvertently) in practice facilitate material inequality, epistemicide, ecological destruction, and undemocratic supranational authority. Liberals are then repeatedly surprised to witness backlashes against their vision: with the New International Economic Order during the 1970s, in the anti-globalization movement around the turn of the millennium, with Occupy! in 2011–12, and in populist nationalism currently. When might IR institutionalists dare to imagine that there could be other alternatives to liberalism besides mercantilism?

²¹Buchanan and Keohane 2006.

²²Zürn 2018, ch. 9.

Subordination of normative issues in institutionalist theory is arguably interconnected with the previously discussed neglect of deeper social structures. For example, shortfalls of global democracy often link closely with transplanetary stratifications of class, country, gender, and race. Problems of global distributive justice come into sharper relief with a structural analysis of capitalism. Challenges of global cognitive justice – that is, ethics for constructive negotiation of cultural diversity and difference in world affairs – largely relate to structural hierarchies of identity and knowledge. Questions of global ecological justice become clearer when deeper structures of anthropocentrism and extractivism are brought into focus. To this extent, the incorporation of more structural analysis could also facilitate greater and more reflexive normative awareness than institutionalist global governance theory has generally provided.

To be sure, the present call for more integration of positive and normative analysis in global governance research, beyond a value-shallow institutionalism, does not advocate a politicization of theory in which passion trumps logic and evidence. The intent is rather to urge careful and explicit attention to the normative motivations and implications of each academic investigation. In addition, heightened ethical consciousness might be applied to the execution of global governance investigations, thereby making visible questions of (non-)participation, just resource allocation, transcultural engagement, and ecological footprints within the research process itself. Greater normative mindfulness furthermore would involve anticipating the potential political use (and misuse) of research findings. In short, a more holistic global governance theory, beyond institutionalism, would comprehensively interweave explanatory and evaluative knowledge.

Overcoming Euro-centrism

A particular normative-intellectual issue, already touched upon above with the question of cognitive justice, is the prevailing Euro-centrism of existing institutionalist global governance scholarship. With Euro-centrism, ‘global’ regulation is predominantly understood as it is perceived and practiced on western-modern lines, especially in Europe and North America. In this vein, all of the cited literature and most of the concrete examples in *A Theory* come from the culturally, economically, historically, and politically dominant global north – even if the book amply notes the rise of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The result – however unconscious and unintended – is a hegemonic knowledge that excludes ‘the other’: the global south, the subaltern, the religious, and so on.

To identify Euro-centrism in modern academe is hardly a new discovery. By now most reflexive ‘western’ scholars, including Zürn, readily acknowledge this bias in their work. As a limited countervailing step, a fringe of recent research has focused on global governance institutions based outside the North Atlantic core.²³ In addition, several projects have ventured to facilitate dialog among diverse world-order conceptions of global governance.²⁴ However, the majority of institutionalists (and indeed international theorists more generally) still shrug, apologetically or not, that

²³E.g. Kayaoglu 2015.

²⁴Katzenstein 2010; Scholte 2015, 2020a.

Euro-centrism is ‘just the way things are’. In this light it seems unfortunate that Keohane in this symposium responds to shortfalls in institutionalism by counseling a return to equally Euro-centric realism.²⁵

This situation is problematic, not least normatively. Euro-centric exclusions of different perspectives and experiences of global governance are in good part an undemocratic exercise of arbitrary knowledge power that suppresses marginalized voices. The dominance of western-modern institutionalism results not only from professional excellence – as established by peer review and the like – but also substantially from inherited privilege as embedded in world-historical structures. This is not per se to discredit Euro-centric accounts of global governance. However, it is to urge greater humble realization on the part of western-modern institutionalists of their specific historical positionality, as well as to encourage orthodox researchers to suspend their cultural parochialism to listen to and learn from other life-worlds.

Such transcultural exploration would not only be a normatively democratic move, but could also be politically timely. Contemporary global politics appears to be moving beyond Euro-American hegemony. True, the speed of this shift can be exaggerated, and the degree to which emergent forces in global governance are ‘non-western’ (in the sense of departing from core structures of western modernity) can also be debated. Still, global power distributions are changing, and persistent Euro-centrism in global studies may work against sorely needed global cooperation as political constellations shift in the decades ahead. As Barnett suggests, global governance might get more support if it ceased to be identified with a liberal international order.²⁶

Indeed, a reorientation of cultural politics in global governance research could also be concretely productive. After all, Euro-centric western-modern liberalism may not have all the answers for contemporary planetary concerns. For example, concepts of ‘buen vivir’ and ‘florestania’ from indigenous epistemologies in Latin America could offer valuable alternatives to ‘sustainable development’ in global ecological governance.²⁷ Islamic notions of *jihad* could shed important insight on questions of global justice.²⁸ *Talanoa* practices from the Pacific and *hehe* ideas from China could provide new approaches to global conflict transformation.²⁹ In these and other cases, Euro-centrism could be depriving global governance theory of valuable insights and policy tools.

Conclusion

Prompted by both enthusiastic reception of and certain reservations over Michael’s Zürn’s *A Theory of Global Governance*, this commentary has reflected on possibilities going forward beyond institutionalist IR. From a position of critical global political sociology, I have particularly urged: (a) further distance from state-centrism; (b) greater attention to transscalar qualities of global governing; (c) more

²⁵Keohane 2020.

²⁶Barnett 2020; see also Pouliot 2020.

²⁷Maldonado 2009; Gudynas 2011.

²⁸Mostafa 2010.

²⁹Halapua and Halapua 2010; Xu *et al.* 2010.

incorporation of social-structural aspects of global regulation; (d) trilateral integration of individual, institutional and structural sources of legitimacy in global governance; (e) more synthesis of positive and normative analysis; and (f) critical distancing from Euro-centrism. Together, these reorientations imply a transformative reconstruction of global governance theory, one that arguably could better align academic endeavors with actual practices and policy priorities in contemporary world politics.

As emphasized from the outset, this critique does not advocate an abandonment of institutional research on global governance. On the contrary, as epitomized by *A Theory*, institutional analysis makes large and crucial contributions to knowledge. One cannot make adequate sense of world order today without full consideration of the organizational workings of regulatory bodies with planetary remit – and the objectives, perceptions, calculations, and tactics of the actors who engage in these policy processes.

Rather, the key problem identified in this essay is *institutionalism*: that is, the tendency to limit understanding of global governance to a positive analysis of the organizational dynamics of global-level agencies in a western-liberal mold. Of course, it is necessary to circumscribe an analysis to retain manageability, but some delimitations unhelpfully curtail important knowledge and politics. Marginalization of nonstate actors, reification of spaces, neglect of deeper structures, separation of normative and positive analysis, and exclusion of the non-West are instances of such counterproductive analytical boundaries: counterproductive in the sense of removing alternative explanations (that warrant a hearing) and obstructing alternative politics (that warrant a try).

To underline, the program prescribed here is transformative. It is not realized by adding a few knobs to institutionalism: a bit more nonstate actors here, a bit of deeper structure there, an occasional study of BRICS, and so on. Instead, the best of existing institutionalist international theory would be integrated with the best of network analysis, critical geography, structural sociology, normative political theory, and global cultural studies. The result of this transdisciplinary synthesis would be something qualitative different from the global governance theories known so far.

Of course, this transformative vision will raise objections, not least from IR institutionalists. Theoretically, it might be argued that the scale of analytical ambition is excessive, asking scholars to handle a ‘meta-perspective’ with inaccessible degrees of innovation and complexity. Empirically, it might be argued that datasets are lacking for the suggested analysis. Practically, it might be argued that too many habits, reputations and resources are vested in IR institutionalism to unseat this paradigm of global governance research. Normatively, it might be argued that propositions for post-liberal world orders are uncertain and untested. Politically, it might be argued that liberal-internationalists are reluctant to contemplate post-westernist world orders that contest their knowledge/power. On these grounds and more, one could anticipate considerable resistance to the alternative and transformational course sketched here.

Yet, at the bottom line one has to ask what sort of knowledge is wanted to meet contemporary politics. A dominance of institutionalism in past global governance theory has paralleled (and facilitated) a dominance of liberalism in past global

governance practice. This knowledge-practice nexus has over many decades often advanced cooperation in and for an increasingly global world. However, for the six reasons elaborated here, marginal intellectual returns of liberal institutionalism are generally slowing, while practical pressures are inexorably growing around global-scale challenges of cultural pluralism, democracy, distributive justice, ecological integrity, liberty, material well-being, moral conduct, peace, and solidarity. However, difficult and painful it can be to discard old academic habits, we may need to try something different.

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